

## JEAN ARASANAYAGAM'S " THE OUTSIDER "

Le Roy ROBINSON

Jean Arasanayagam is a poet and writer of fiction and non-fiction. She has won two National Awards for poetry and non-fiction. She is also a painter and designer who has exhibited her work.

She was born Jean Solomons in Kandy, Sri Lanka, of Dutch-Burgher descent, and spent her childhood in a village called Kadugannawa.

In 1961 she married Thiagarajah Arasanayagam, who is also a writer and painter. They have twin daughters, both of whom are university students and are also writers and painters.

Jean Arasanayagam had her early education in a private Methodist missionary school. She graduated from the University of Ceylon, Colombo, where she majored in English, Latin and History. In 1964 she received a Diploma in Education from the University of Peradeniya. She also has an M. Litt. from the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, Scotland.

She has taught English language and literature in a convent school in Kurunegala and at St. Anthony's College, a private Catholic high school, Kalugatela. She has lectured at the Open University, at the University of Peradeniya's Dumbura campus, and at the Kandy Polytechnical Institute. She presently lectures at the English Teachers College, Peradeniya.

" The Outsider " is being edited by Le Roy Robinson.

\* \* \* \* \*

## THE OUTSIDER PART 2

Pata lay in his coffin dressed in a cream fugi silk suit. A shawl of crimson and gold was wrapped round his shoulders. A garland of flowers round his neck.

The daughters in law walked round the bier, sprinkling rice and money, dipping incense sticks in turmeric water and sandalwood which they placed at his head.

A basin of water with a clean white napkin was placed beside him. The family dhoby stood by him.

The cousin Ratna was supervising the performance of the rituals. The children had kept vigil the whole night. Now, bathed and dressed in fresh clothes, they came in.

They were looking for a veshti for Kumar.

Thiagarajah was in freshly laundered veshti and muslin kurta.

" Haven't you a veshti ? " Lakshmi asked Kumar.

" Thiagarajah is trying to find me one."

" What about Pata's old veshti ? Can't you get one of them ?"

" No, amma can't find a single one left."

" What has happened to them all ?"

" No one knows."

\* \* \* \* \*

Lakshmi says : " I am sorry I cannot ask you all to come home. There is pandemonium there with the new baby. It is also tudakku for you to come after the funeral."

\* \* \* \* \*

The young nephew's wife has just had a baby.

" Mama," he asks his uncle Kumar, " With all your education how much do you earn ? As a teacher what is your salary ?"

" Nothing."

" With all the years of studying what does my brother earn ? As for me I have my own business. I can make enough money out of my ventures. I have started a pineapple plantation."

\* \* \* \* \*

Opening the almirah, Kumar saw Pata's horoscope lying on a top shelf. The palmyrah leaf was brown with age. The writing was fine and precise. Opening out like a fan, the leaf, dry and old, was as smooth as a fingernail. The last leaf ended at the age of 76, but Pata had lived until he was 96.

A life in which there had been no great pain, no anguish, no heartbreak. No death of loved ones. No loss. No passion either. He had done nothing in his life cycle to shake the world. Yet the stability and tradition that he believed his children would maintain and continue was as dust, like the ashes they would gather from his pyre.

\* \* \* \* \*

The rituals that were being carried out so meticulously were only the beginning to more that would follow. The lighting of the pyre, the collecting of the ashes, the almsgiving of remembrance.

His sons would take the ashes to the lonely temple by the seashore at Mutwal. The wash of waves sounding on the shore. The screeching sea gulls reeling on wave crests. Scattering the ashes in

the sea.

The two brothers would walk up to the verge of the sea, turn their backs upon the waves, and, facing the land, lift the pot of ashes to the shoulder and throw it into the ocean. They would not look back even once but walk back swiftly, leaving the shore and going home.

Pata's cremation would have to be re-enacted. The Pusari priest would burn a small effigy of straw after he built a pyre out of little sticks. The ashes too would be put into the pot which would be thrown into the sea. The waves would drift towards the great temple of Ramesweram where Pata had gone with his wife in the early years of their married life to make a vow for the birth of their first born.

\* \* \* \* \*

Thud ! Thud ! The heavy deliberate sound of the pestle falling against the wooden mortar filled the silence of the room. Thrice the sons lifted the pestle and let it fall into the mortar.

\* \* \* \* \*

The family house had been given as dowry to the younger daughter. Time was passing and a marriage had to be arranged. No choices in their lives. Partners chosen to bed with. Procreate in the traditional manner. Sell the paddy fields and the land. Unearth the gold from the casket. Embellish the skin. Swathe the limbs in crimson silk, golden thread, smoothest velvet. Braid the hair with threaded jasmine. Paint the traditional designs on hands and soles of feet. Horoscopes must tally. Religion. Caste. Profession.

Now they were abroad. The brothers had all signed away their shares in the house so that it could be gifted to the sister.

Kumar was made to feel especially guilty. He had married outside the hierarchical framework. He could not afford to protest that his children's inheritance was being wrested from them. He had already endangered their chances of marriage. He could not risk their curses anymore. So he signed. Signed away his share. Coerced by fear and tradition. He was not sufficiently a rebel. He was yet to be a rebel.

But how had it helped. The greater part of the house was let out to strangers after the sister went abroad. The parents were nudged into two rooms in the house. The door to the main house was closed to them. For some time the picture of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, hung over the front door. Then it was taken down. Strict instructions were left that none of the brothers should be allowed to stay in the house. But Rajan came back. Sold his palatial house with the mirrored walls and marble floors.

Fight after fight followed with the tenants. Insults hurled out at each other. Caste. Caste. Caste insults. Lawsuit.

" I'll slipper you," says one sister in law to the tenants.

Rajan puts up a wall. Leases the land illegally.

" He has got nine lakhs," writes the sister. " Not a cent he has given to me, brothers or mother."

" Yes, I leased the land," says Rajan. " There are loopholes in the law. You know after the 1983 riots I said that these people would not return to the island. I wanted to lease the land, buy the house, put up flats, but as soon as they heard that I had leased the land, my sister and brother in law didn't want to sell to me. I was played out. I only got three lakhs."

The niece tells him : " You cheated my father. You're a crook."

“ Not like that. These things are done.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Now Achchi has nowhere to stay. Mohini threatens to pack up her bags and leave if the old lady returns. She writes to her sister in law. She calls the old lady “ Kaledi ” in derogation. “ I know what agony you must be going through living with her.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Sulochana speaks of her “ dowry ” within inverted commas. She had no private income of her own. She has no wealth like the elder sister. Completely dependent on her husband. “ She has not changed even after going abroad. Tradition dictates that it is the duty of the husband to provide for the family.”

\* \* \* \* \*

A family divided. Bitter. Estranged.

\* \* \* \* \*

They were always estranged.

When Kumar had married he had to come and stay in his old house before he changed jobs. The whole family was cold towards him. No one spoke to him. They were angry, very angry. Nobody sat down to eat with him. He sat at the table, eating in silence. They wept. They scolded. They reproved. They blamed the elder sister.

" You knew everything and you told us nothing. You are to blame. Why didn't you advise him ? See what happened to your elder brother ? We sent him to England to study and he never returned. Married an Englishwoman. He never returned. You visited him when you were there. Naturally what could your younger brother surmise from all that ? That you approve. You encouraged him."

There was no truth in these words. Lakshmi akka had done all she could to discourage him : " Don't marry into that community. The girls have too much freedom. They make their own choices in marriage. What do you know of that family ?"

Only Pata had come and sat beside Kumar. One day when he was eating his food, alone and miserable at the table, Pata had quietly said : " Now what you have done has been done. We cannot change anything. Don't be hurt by the attitude of the others." And he had got up and walked away quietly.

\* \* \* \* \*

" Achchi never liked you from the beginning," Rajan said. " Only Pata liked you," he told me.

\* \* \* \* \*

" When amma dies," says Kumar, " I, as the youngest son, will have to light the pyre."

\* \* \* \* \*

July 6, 1984. The news comes in. It is censored but trickles

reach us through the broken conduits and the mined roads, press reports, word of mouth, eye witnesses. They have mounted the long awaited offensive in the North.

“ Several terrorists killed. The exact number is not yet ascertained.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Nobody counts bodies, limbs, heads, in this deadly game of win or lose, but the death toll rises.

“ Combing out operations, search, capture, destroy missions, surveillance zones.”

No one carries the ashes to the sea. No one claims the bodies on the streets. If you do, you are suspect too.

There are secret watchers. They know that their sons have died. There are beds that remain forever empty.

Do widows show their grief ?

In the market place, the huge turtles struggle, waiting to be over turned and hacked into pieces.

The fisherwomen haggle, their hands covered with bloodened fish scales, their long knife blades sharp.

Skirmishes and forays on the street. Barbed wire, barriers of sand bags.

They run from garden to garden to lay the land mines.

“ Please don't do it in my garden, Mather the Protestant minister says. “ My sister is expecting.”

They never leave the wounded on the streets. They carry them away. Trails of bloodstains. To pick out the metal, you must cut into the flesh.

Death migrations.



The offensive begins in the North. It has moved up from the East, from the South. All are trained to kill. Young boys.

" They had no alternative but to use heavy weapons."

\* \* \* \* \*

Compose the new oppari funeral dirges :

They were warriors.

Their lives were short.

The tiger cubs begin to snarl when they are very young.

Their eyes blaze like exploding Grenades. Their teeth bite on their own death.

Never will they walk round the yaham except with spectre brides.

\* \* \* \* \*

What happens to the ash from the smoking incinerators ?

\* \* \* \* \*

" Amma, what tenacity you have. Don't you know that your eldest grandson is dead at 23 ?"

A wasted death.

" We were driving furiously. We wanted to overtake the car ahead. There was a pretty girl. It was a game. Slowing down. Accelerating. The car turned turtle. I was in a coma for days and days. They thought I would never come out of it."

No one knows of the grape harvest of tumors growing in his brain. A vineyard of grapes bursting with blood.

“ Appa, I can’t bear this headache. I want to die.”

\* \* \* \* \*

His cousins dream and dream of him after his death. He is in a place, a green place, with lots of trees, plants, flowers dropping from the sky and swirling mists over flowing water. He is happy.

Geetha sees this in a dream :

He tells his cousins : “ This Christmas I want to be in full white. White trousers, shirt, cravat, and a red rose in my button-hole.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“ Look at him,” Achchi says. “ See how he talks. Just like a lawyer.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Skanda says : “ When Achchi fights with amma, I know what will happen next. I count one two three, and then the fight starts with appah. Something is wrong with ammah too. She has all these bottles of cosmetics. She doesn’t want anyone to touch her things. I never speak to my father. He is so strict.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The picture of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, which had hung above the front door, was missing. The glasspaned doors were locked.

Kumar knocked on the door which led to the rooms which his mother and brother's family occupied. There was silence. He rapped on the door sharply with his knuckles. He heard a scuffling and a whispering inside.

" Who's there ? Who's there ? " He heard excited yet subdued voices.

He knocked louder. " Open the door," he called out loudly. " Why are you taking so long to open the door ? I want to come in."

" Come the other way, through the back entrance."

" What, are you asking me to come like a beggar to see my mother ? Open the door." Kumar continued to rattle the door knob.

At last, reluctantly, the door yielded. The brother said nervously, " Come in, come in quickly and shut the door."

" What is the meaning of all this ? " Kumar asked.

" Don't you know ? We are not supposed to use the verandah. There has been a lot of trouble between the occupants of the main part of the house and ourselves. We are not allowed to use the front verandah or even step onto it. They have repeatedly gone to the police and now we are forbidden to come this way. We too have had to make several complaints to the police."

" It is all mother's fault," said Kumar. " Why did she give the whole property to sister ? She should have retained the life interest at least."

" Don't you know what a lot of trouble we have been having ? Mother has been pushed about and abused. Sister in law has had to go to the courts."

" Why ? What happened ? "

" The tenant had held Thiagarajah roughly by the shoulder. Sister in law had taken her slipper and threatened to slipper him.

It has been a traumatic experience for her. She had to go to courts, spend sleepless nights. She couldn't eat. Couldn't swallow her food. She walks about the house all night. Can't sleep, hour after hour."

" Why did younger sister consent to give out the house to these people then ?

" It was all done through our elder brother in law and Lakshmi akka."

" At any rate, it is mother's fault. Don't you know that we brothers have been told that we have no right to spend even a night in this house ? "

" Who said so ? "

" Why, our brother in law, Indran."

" He is abroad. Why does he dislike us so much ? "

" Isn't it mother's fault again ? This is the husband she found for our sister. I suppose he has some grouse against us. They're not coming back to live here. They want to sell the house. Yes, the family house. That's what happens when strangers come into the family."

" Strangers ? But he was the traditional bridegroom. Horoscopes agreed. Caste. Religion. Everything. At any rate how much choice was left for the younger sister ? Soon she would have been past the marrying age. Kept in the house. Not allowed to go anywhere without being accompanied. Didn't study. Didn't have any professional skills. Only one role and that was marriage. And to marry well, a big dowry — that was necessary. If our sister wants her marriage to endure she must give in to his whims."

" This is the one house mother had saved. You know what happened to all the properties she had. If she had them still she would have been a wealthy woman."

" Well, the house is not ours now."

" It is my intention to buy it," said the elder brother.

" Mother, you don't have to endure all that humiliation. You can come and live with us."

" I will never leave the house. Your father died here. I too must die here."

" How can you all live here. It is so cramped up. If we go away who will look after mother ? Our being here is a protection to her," Rajan says.

\* \* \* \* \*

" We had a big fight the other day," said Mohini. " I said, you people, who are you ? what is your caste ? Traditionally you are bound to serve us. Now you are trying to get the better of us."

\* \* \* \* \*

" What's the use of all this talk ? " Kumar said. " The only house that amma has managed to keep she has now lost. Now it will go into the hands of strangers."

" I am alright," said Achchi. " They leave me alone."

" Oh, that is what she always says because she is afraid that she will have to go from here."

" Ha ! They leave her alone ? One day the tenants pushed her into a drain. What lies she speaks ! You can't believe anything she says. Never believe her."

" Oh, that one who is living in the house," said Savithri. " One day a settee had been placed against the door to hinder me. I pushed it aside. She tried to stop me. I got my own way. Oh, I never go there now. What have I got to gain ? "

"Where is that picture of Lakshmi goddess?" asked Kumar.

"Those people are Christians. They have removed it."

"Where is it? Bring it here," said Kumar. It has been there from the time my parents lived in this house."

"Don't be foolish," said Rajan.

"You will end up in the courts," said the lawyer brother.

"Wait and see. You will get a summons once you get back home."

"Bring me a hammer and a nail," said Kumar.

Kumar pulled a chair forward and stood on it and hammered in a nail. He took the picture of Lakshmi and carefully hung it above the front door.

"Now let anyone dare to remove it," Kumar said.

"What a great thing you have done," Thiagarajah said.

"Why should we be afraid?"

"Yes, you will go back, and we will have to face the music. We don't even get our own letters. I lost an important contract because the postman was told that no one of my name lived here. So many lakhs I lost. I'll sue them. That blue jeans contract. In vain I lost it."

\* \* \* \* \*

The lotus is sinking slowly into the water. Lakshmi vanishes bit by bit. The mobs came and looted everything. The elephant tusks in ebony? Where are they? Disappeared. Sold. The furniture is burnt. The glass is shattered.

\* \* \* \* \*

The brother returns, not Achchi.

Sulochana writes : " He causes enough trouble when we want to sell the house. Not a cent does he pay for rent or rates."

\* \* \* \* \*

His son dies. He falls and fractures his bones.

" Give me fifty rupees for the taxi, Lakshmi akka," he says.

He fell and fractured his leg.

" Must have been pushed," said the eldest brother in law.  
" One of his deals or something."

Who knows ?

It turns out to be true.

" I went on his invitation to talk business. He was my business partner. We were friends. Suddenly he grabbed me by my shirt and started hitting me. What could I do ? I fell. I had to go to hospital."

\* \* \* \* \*

Rajan is very proud of his luscious, seductive looking wife. " When we were in an hotel in Austria, dining, she had many admirers. One of the diners came and knelt beside her and proffered a red rose. They sent message after complimentary message to her."

\* \* \* \* \*

Mohini keeps a light burning eternally before the portrait of her dead son.

" I want to leave this world and go and join him", she weeps.

“ How can I ever forget my first born ? ”

\* \* \* \* \*

Ketha ! Ketha !

Rahu !

The serpents. Bad period. It is Ketha ! Ketha ! The malefic planets are wreathed with coiling serpents.

\* \* \* \* \*

Achchi makes a tight ball of rice for the crows. The black crows peck and peck. They dash their hard beaks against the grains of rice loosed from her hands.

The crow is the vahanam of Saturn. Darkness. No mirages in the brain. The aperture of the cave is darkened by the flapping wings of the crows.

Their raucous cries carry message after message to her ears : Friend. Lover. Husband. Child. No one remains except the great doom bird, the ominous death messenger. Madness. Senility.

“ Money. Money. Money. Money is flowing every day. You are spending all this money. Even a teaspoon of sugar. How much money ! ”

\* \* \* \* \*

Her hands weigh out the gold of her marriage thali from which she parts to pay sundry expenses. The sovereigns melt and flow away in a river bearing the unravelled garlands of jasmine wrenched from the manaverai.



The sacred flame of the yaham flickers and goes out. The pyre begins to be readied for the burning brands. In her ears the brilliants sparkle. The rubies sparkle, sharp droplets of blood pricked from her skin. The brilliant in her nostril glitters. Ancient goddess of a forgotten cult. Embellished and ornamented.

In her lonely temple she feeds and nourishes the black crow. She trembles in fear as she hears its raucous cries echoing in the cave. She moves further back. Back. Back into the darkness. " Kethu ! " She cries with triumph. Caster of horoscopes. " This is my bad period."

She wallows in the comfort of her sheets on the big wide bed. She presses the blankets to warm her chilled blood. " Bad period !" she says as she presses the kneaded balls of rice into her bulging cheeks. Kethu ! Bad period.

She sips the hot tea, the hot coffee. She feels the blood coursing through her arteries.

\* \* \* \* \*

She does not want peace. She wants the omens and portents of her horoscope to come true,

No one to bear the pooja offerings to this ancient cobwebbed spirit haunted sanctum of her body. Her pooja tray is empty too. So how can she approach the gods ? Who is there to fill her tray with fruit and flowers, with cocount and camphor ?

On the vedhi of Pillayar Kovil there is no kumbun decorated with mango leaves. The god of wisdom, the Pillayar god, Ganesh, protected the family, waving his trunk and scattering knowledge upon the family.

The elephants with their slow heavy gait carried their ance-

stors to Nallur.

The great kites lifted from the trees by the strong winds soared into the sky.

Time has torn down the birds of tissue.

Lolling from the palmyrah trees, the spiked heads, the decapitated heads, blown off by exploding mines.

The refugees creep into the kovils. They ready themselves for the sacrifice.

The ancient palanquin has carried its ghosts for the last time. The shredded curtains disintegrate.

The black stone naga creeps out into the grove near the Bhairava Temple. It stretches up to the threshold where the rice flour kolam patterns flicker through the rays of a lost sun.

The paddy fields are sold for dowry.

The pattagams are empty.

\* \* \* \* \*

“ How shall we fill the pots for Thai Pongal ? ”

Only the mango leaves hang like thick earlobes with their clusters of ripening and reddening skin. Only for the birds. Only for the squirrels.

Kethu ! Kethu !

\* \* \* \* \*

Lost in the darkness of the grove, Amman appears beckoning. And combing her white hair. The red splotches spread like flowers on her white saree. The third eye is as black as a bullet hole on her forehead as she falls.

" Kadavelai. Oh, God ! God ! God ! Shiva. My bad period."

\* \* \* \* \*

The cyanide kisses the lips of the bridegrooms of death.

\* \* \* \* \*

" Your son has fallen and broken his leg."

" Ah ? I don't care. It is my bad period."

\* \* \* \* \*

The dark inside of the cave. The circle of the thetpai grass that knits her fingers to the rituals of the past breaks off. The pooja offerings lie neglected on the discarded tray. The coconut is black and green with mould. The tulsi plant is withered. The holy ash and the kum kum spill into the thirtham. Sandlewood paste is streaked with scarlet. Rubbed off from the parting of the hair is the bridal kum kum. The pottu is finally wiped off. Leaves a scar. The third eye of Shiva is blind.

\* \* \* \* \*

Money. Money. Money. Flowing like the Ganges.

Dead fish float, bellies distended with the cremation ashes on the current of her thought.

They have all departed from her life.

Her tongue searches for words that draw blood.

She rubs and rubs a finger, smearing it with blood. She draws

the red kolams on the threshold of her life.

Her fingers shape the outline of the wings of the crow, not of the white swan. It rises up and flaps its wings against her face.

Her heart has emptied itself of feeling. An old mango seed with all the juice and nectar sucked out.

\* \* \* \* \*

Her children have fed off and crawled on her breasts.

\* \* \* \* \*

Day after day she draws the shroud about her. Tucks it in closely.

\* \* \* \* \*

The food is brought to her. The craving is still there.

“ Shall I eat now ? You want me to eat ? ”

She is not yet ready for renunciation.

“ Do I ask for meat ? fish ? chicken ? What you give I eat. You give more than enough. I am not eating chicken. Only vegetables and rice, no ? ”

“ But, Achchi, if you want, you can have all these things.”

“ Chi. I don't want.”

But she eats furtively. She loves the taste of what she denies herself.

\* \* \* \* \*

" Respectable women do not speak of their lovers. That is vulgar." She tells this to the daughter in law.

Crush desire. Circumcize the taste buds, the eroticism of the lusts of the flesh, the lust of appetite.

The suppression of all desire is purity.

\* \* \* \* \*

" I did not desire those six children. They were not children of my love. I was a wife. I had to be a mother. A barren womb would make me inauspicious. I had to beseech the gods for the first child. The gods had to open the portals. Now I have closed the doors on their memory. My children are the brands for my pyre. But I am not yet ready."

\* \* \* \* \*

Her laughter is cruel. It is meant to hurt. She does not live among those who speak her language anymore. " How can I speak to learned people like you ? The words fall like stones from my mouth."

The terrain is hard in this alien world. The rocks hurt her feet. The water is bitter. The food is poison.

We will be forever strangers to each other.

The great crow rises above the black boulders and carries her away, above the forest of myths. She calls and calls for the palanquin bearers. No answer.

" Who will carry my bier ? "

Only ghosts.

Over the mine-pocked roads the armoured tanks and the

trucks rumble.

She knows nothing of those deaths where they bore the richly clad gods.

The beaks of the crows tug at her old skin as she gurgles and chokes with fear.

“ I am not yet ready. Not yet. Do not take me away.”

The bodies lie unburied. Crows peck at the flesh. There is food in the streets for the crows and the dogs.

“ Where are all the sons to light the pyres ?”

\* \* \* \* \*

She lies crouched up on the armchair pushing thought back into the recesses and chambers of her skull. Staring into space. The dark embedded pupils of her eyes drowning like fish in the opaque lakes of her cataracted eyes.

I give her a book. “ Read,” I tell her. “ Don’t let your mind be empty.”

The dark cave, the lidded eyes pressing down, staring into blackness strung with the dead fetuses of her past memories, the skeletons of her ancestors clacking about in wind that icily blows through the entrance. Cave and womb filled with death. Barren earth parched and shrunken, not even a paddy grain for a bird to pick. The milky kernel is boll.

“ Read.” I place books in her hands.

“ I cannot understand these books. When you are old ..... Ha !” She laughs. “ You are trying to educate me. That book I have read twice, no ? My head is full of things about gods and religion.”

She sits and sits for hours inside her cave, blocking the entrance to even a shaft of light.

Her skin grows hot, then cold, then hot again. " Fever," she says. " I have a little temperature today."

She curves her hands caressingly into the hollows of her throat. She strokes her forehead, loving the heat of life, unwilling to part with its delirium.

On hot days she sprinkles water on the ground, sleeps stretched out like a crippled vine, twisted.

" Hot, hot, like an oven." She closes all the windows and she fans, winnowing the chaff of years, of memories to blow in the wind.

I stand at the entrance, watching. Our eyes scream at each other trying to find words.

" What do you want ? " she asks. " You want to see me ? "

Her eyes see the ant crawling on the rim of her cup or the wasp that flies in through the window.

Sleeping, she wakes up suddenly. " What is it ? " she asks. " You touched me ? "

Sometimes she sings for hours and hours to the grand daughter.

" There was a rose in the devil's garden

Beneath the powder and paint

There lived the heart of a saint."

Learnt from the brother to whom she gave the infection from her blood, upon whom she breathed, to whom she was akka, akka, the angel of death.

" Brother taught me these songs," she says.

" I shall build you a hut

You shall be my favorite nut,

Un pa, un, pa, un pa ..... "

She talks : " I went to Ladies College. I travelled by buggy to

school. Long skirts I wore, pavatha. The principal of the Christian Mission School was Mrs. Nixon. A Burgher teacher, the sister of Dr. Raafelsz taught me. She did not have brown hair. Her hair was black. She was quite fair. I learnt French also. We had to say our prayers and sing hymns. Praise Him. Praise Him. I only studied up to grade four."

Still like a young girl, she preens herself before the mirror, arranging the folds of her saree.

"Ah, you look fresh and nice today," I say.

After a bath, her white hair is spread on her shoulders. "Put perfume. Put powder." Then, "What is the use? I am naki, naki. I am kaledi."

Her powder, her perfume are hidden under her clothes. Her soap is almost always dry. "Not to waste," she says.

Her silk sarees are carefully folded. Over and over again she wears cotton ones till they almost disintegrate.

"Ah, who will give?"

At Deepavali, once, twice, she gave me gifts of two silk sarees.

"New clothes, everyone must have them for Deepavali," Kumar says.

White veshtis. Silk sarees. Gifts for everyone.

Now no one remembers her.

On Deepavali day she carefully washes and changes into fresh clothes that she hoards and hoards.

No one gives her gifts anymore.

\* \* \* \* \*

Almsgivings. I had never been invited to attend a single almsgiving for Kumar's father or even for his nephew. It was always a



question of money. Not having enough money to be lavish and generous with food. Only Kumar received a call : " Come for appah's almsgiving."

For Skanda, who had come home, been happy with us, and who longed to have his uncle Kumar for a father, they never invited us. When Rajan had to spend he always had no money.

" Now who will spend for ammah's funeral ? For her almsgiving ? "

They are all waiting for her to die.

" What shall we do when she passes away ? " Kumar asks.  
" Please close her lids. Finish off everything in Kandy."

Prem has at last after thirty years sent a hundred pounds for amma. They want to keep part of the money for her funeral. Six children. Pata did not leave her any money. It is the duty of the children to bury their mother, their father, to light the pyre, to throw the ashes into the sea, to have almsgivings.

\* \* \* \* \*

" We had a nice nursery for the baby, " Lakshmi says.

The son and the daughter in law live upstairs. It has been converted into a flat, furnished with antique furniture, all from the largesse of the grandfather's inheritance.

" We are still using Babananthan mama's bassinet for the baby."

" You still have it ? After all these years ? "

" Why these things are kept carefully and handed down from generation to generation."

\* \* \* \* \*

Babananthan had been a relation of Laksmi's husband. He had been very wealthy, but he had gone through most of this wealth.

When Lakshmi had been newly married she had gone on the traditional visits to the houses of relations.

At Babananthan's goats were all over the place, even on the chairs. Pellets of dung were scattered all over.

Yet Babananthan's bassinet was a precious heirloom to be handed down only for the babies who could claim kinship to caste and tradition.

No outsider, no intruder, would ever be allowed to use this frail container.

\* \* \* \* \*

She was an old woman walking in a deserted garden. Up and down without any purpose. Her skin is as dark as a leaf that is shaded by dusk. She will not come out during the day. The sun is too hot for her complexion. Yet she has worshipped the sun in her day as the milk frothed from the boiling pot of sadham and flowed down its side at Thai Pongal.

The flapping wings of the crow have darkened her sun.

In the darkening green sea of leaves and shadow she swims spasmodically like a tired fish, her twisted arms like dishevelled fins pushing at the air to keep herself afloat.

\* \* \* \* \*

The birds go about their business finishing up for the day with their food hunting and beak gathering of twig and fluff. The squirrels sound faintly as they scurry along the branches of the

guava trees.

The dried leaves have been swept up by the eakel brooms and the pink orange bougainvillaeas rest like fallen bits of sunset clouds in the mango trees. The mango harvest is over.

We could never eat the mangoes from this particular tree. When they ripened, they fell ; the skin was whole but the rottenness lay within. An occasional fruit was orange red inside and tasted like nectar.

\* \* \* \* \*

She was deceived by the smooth outer skin and picked them up each evening painstakingly to range them outside the gate for passersby. Day in day out we told her that the fruit was spoilt. She would never listen.

In the grove in Navaly too the mangoes now fall, unheeded. Who was there to pluck them ? Everywhere strangers had taken over. She was ousted even from there.

\* \* \* \* \*

Her knees bend as she lurches. Age. The travesty of a body that has still only a few identifications of social position and power. The gold and jewels in her ears and nostrils, the earlobes pulled down by the weight of the stones.

Her fingers are now entwined with a circle of invisible grass, like the thetpai grass that once united her to the rituals of her religion. An invisible circle entwined with the finger of Death, bone to bone.

Time that has kneaded and moulded flesh grows starved and

dry as a cloth wick as the simmering coconut oil empties drunk and consumed by fire in the great brass light shuddering kuthuvillaku that filled with radiance the inner sanctum of the temple of Siva Shakthi.

She holds in her gnarled hands the aalathi and circles it before the bridegroom Death as the figures from the past crumble on the manaverai and fall on the pyre which bursts into flame, the silk hissing as the torched tongues lick the milk and honey bathed bodies of youth.

Ah, love leaves an old man coughing his phlegm into her cupped hands as he chokes and chokes from his aged strangling throat. His spittle and phlegm spurt into it and their blue veiled eyes shred the curtains apart to reveal only spectres.

\* \* \* \* \*

She hardly ever talks of Pata. If she quotes him it is only to reveal the restrictiveness of her life with him. "Appah did not want me to go anywhere."

But she always had her own way, mistress of her house, in command of her servants, the small fish and the country rice for them, the white rice and the seer fish for the family, and the kochi cooks totting up accounts carefully after the marketing. She had an easy and a comfortable life.

The ayahs always looked after the children. Needing his mother and not having her, Kumar would nestle near his young ayah, Jane, and feed from her hand.

Ah, she had her favorites. "Rasa, Rasa, you are delicate. Here, Rasa, eat, take another mouthful, eat. Suck, Rasa, the marrow from this chicken bone. Take, Rasa, take," she told the

delicate son, Thiagarajah.

Kumar would look on, kept aside, with open eyes, awaiting her attention, which he never got.

\* \* \* \* \*

She loved to go to the pictures. With money in her purse, she would get into the car and go to all the Tamil pictures, enjoying the romance, the music, the dance of those voluptuous colorful figures. How else could she endure those long duty filled days of her life with her austere husband ?

\* \* \* \* \*

And her only memories of childhood : " We were taken to Navaly from Colombu when we were very small. I was four years old. Everybody in the village came to see us. In the night the light was kept burning by the well for our ayahs."

They were Sinhalese women from a different climate, a different terrain, and in the dark, as they walked, barefooted, they could tread on scorpions and reptiles. In the dark.

There are no other memories.

\* \* \* \* \*

Recovering from my illness, weak with the nausea and vomiting that has gushed through me, I lie stretched on the couch in the drawing room.

Achchi has eaten her supper, but her feet move in the dark of her room, dry crackling grasshoppers grating against dead leaves.

Click, click, click. They move about the floor, walking up and down.

She comes and stands at the door. "I have eaten my food," she says.

She is happy when I am out of the way. The house cannot have two mistresses. She turns and goes back and her feet start rustling among the leaves of the dark jungle.

It is time for her hot drink. She bears the empty cup through the dark in the clutch of her hands, waiting for the magic potion of sleep and dreams to be poured in.

Kumar goes to the kitchen to boil the water.

She comes toward me, rustling her feet through the dark.

"Oh, God, Achchi, be still. Have patience. Let us have some peace."

"What am I doing?"

She announces each action: "I am closing windows. Six windows are all closed early in the evening."

Restless.

Magic potion.

"Wait a little. You have just eaten."

"Yes, yes, all the time I am eating, drinking. Kasi, kasi, panam, money, money."

"Stop torturing me, Achchi,"

I sob and cry heaving with frustrate tears. That is always the way she shuts her mind to us. Kasi. Kethu.

She goes back, sips her hot drink and begins to smooth, smooth, smooth with the flat of her palm the soft warm blue blanket for the night. She keeps a long edge hanging to wrap herself into the cocoon.

She comes to the door again. "I am going to sleep now. Tomorrow I will go?"

\* \* \* \* \*

You sleep on our bed, that bed which was my marriage bed. This was the bed on which I lay with my babies when you entered for the first time to make the traditional visit that the grandmother must make to see her grandchildren. You slipped those threads of gold onto their wrists. But those bangles snapped so easily. There was nothing stronger with which you could forge those links to your traditions. They snapped soon, so fragile, and lay discarded in curved pieces. They did not last. Snapped and broke as those traditions did in your household. Discarded bits of gold. But now it is this very bed, my bed, you lie on, the bed of your son and his wife. It is I who Invite you to sleep deeply, peacefully, on it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Thin beaten gold bands cannot last. Those symbols had no meaning. When your grand daughter at three years old lay burning with typhoid and we begged you to come and be with her sister, you did not come. None of you came. You did not even come to see her. Those gold circlets lay thrown in a drawer, broken halves. They had no value to me.

\* \* \* \* \*

For you it has always been easy to negate the truth. You are clever because we are helpless when you distort our words.

The water lies before you, but you say, " That is not the ocean, that is the shore. That is sand. See, I am treading on it."

You twist our words, accuse us of creating fantasies. You walk through corridor after corridor of our lives, but you say, "I was never there. You are making up stories. All damn lies." And you laugh and laugh at us.

\* \* \* \* \*

We are helpless unless we too agree and accept the deception which you weave, have woven through the ages into strong, strangling webs.

The bodies of dead memories that you have ensnared lie snapp-ed of blood and withering in hammocks of shadow.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Amma would feed us all," Kumar said. "She would dish out all the food onto a big plate, rice, vegetables, fish, and make balls of it. We sat round her, each holding a poo-arasu leaf in hand. On that she would place the ball of rice with a bit of fish in it."

\* \* \* \* \*

Achchi's breakfast is placed on the table. The windows which have been closed all night are opened for fresh air.

She walks up to the table. Utters one word : "Jarawa."

Then : "Leaving it uncovered. Chi ! In Colombu the food is always covered."

The grand daughter says, "Achchi, why do you scold my mother ?"

"I never said anything. What did I say ? The crow is always



sitting at the window. I have seen it put the beak inside."

" Achchi, don't lie. I heard you. Why are you so rude ? "

" How can I say anything bad ? She is the one who feeds me and looks after me, gives me all my food."

" Then, why do you fight ? Why do you say jarawa ? "

" Money, money, that is it. Money. Ten, fifteen, twenty rupees, fifty rupees, a thousand rupees for my upkeep."

" No, achchi, it is not a question of money. Your mouth is your graveyard."

\* \* \* \* \*

There never will be, there never can be, acceptance.

She gets jealous when the grand daughter spends hours talking to her friend.

She comes and sits down in the hall and talks at random. " Now at this time in Colombu all the kokis are asleep. We had a lot of men servants. In the afternoon they all must sleep everyday."

She boasts : " We had ayahs for all the children. There was the koki, the driver, all the young ayahs."

Her voice is always peremptory because she is used to giving orders.

It is also the centuries old traditions of her caste. Anyone other than her caste was a lesser being, an outsider. She will not visit them or go to their weddings.

Her pride and her strength lie only in the prerogatives of power which her family has clung to from times untold. She gives respect only to Thiagarajah, because he has power, money.

The word love never passes her lips.

\* \* \* \* \*

Navaly. The Nalavars come and work for the family.

The woman sweeps the garden. She never enters the house. After sweeping she is given some stringhoppers and curry to eat.

Sinnian catches parrots. He collects Karuperni after slitting the palmyrah flowers. His long sharp bladed knife is the power he holds in his hands.

Sinnian's mother pleads for a piece of land. "Give us land. Tell your mother to write it in our name. How else can my grand daughter get married?"

Sinnian looks at Sellathe and points the knife at her as if he wants to slit the old palmyrah flower of her head and draw blood out of it. "Times are changing," he says. "Who will carry your biers now? I will never carry it for you."

\* \* \* \* \*

Sinnian falls from the palmyrah tree and dies. Who carries his bier or lights his pyre?

The Brahmin priest will not chant slokas for him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Times are changing. Toddy pots hung from tree gibbets. The snipers are strapped to the trees. The palmyrah flower bursts and oozes with blood falling into the pla, brimming over. The ears of gods who have for so long been peaceful are blasted by the explosions as the bombs fall.

\* \* \* \* \*

" Give us land. Give us a piece of land. Tell your mother to write a piece of property in my grand daughter's name when you go to Colombu," Sinnian's mother tells Kumar. " How can she get married if you do not give this land ? We have lived on it for generations."

\* \* \* \* \*

Sinnian's knife blade glistens as he raises it to slit the palmy-rah flower. Only nectar drips and drips, oozing from the poet.

Sinnian lives by the gathering of this nectar. He and his family serve the Vellalas.

He slits the rope. The pot falls.

" My days of carrying your biers are over."

Sinnian falls from the tree and dies.

But the land is written in his grand daughter's name.

\* \* \* \* \*

As a child, Achchi had been taken on a visit to Sivaram's house.

The wife was not to be seen. She did not come out and sit with them in the drawing room.

But Achchi had seen. Even when she was very young, only a child, she had had this habit of peeping, a large head shooting out as she twisted her neck into an angle of curiosity, a quick lizard-like movement with the globular eyes fixing on people, things, spaces.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sivaram's wife was kept like a prisoner in the house. No one knows for what reason, for what indiscretion she had committed.

Sivaram had one son whom he disciplined severely. He tied him up and thrashed him.

Rajasekeram, Sivaram's only son, grew up to marry Bhahirathi, the sister of Achchi, of Thayalnayaki. He was already a widower with two young daughters.

When he was taken to see the prospective bride and had alighted on the station platform at Jaffna, a relation was waiting to greet him. "Come I will take you to see another girl, a more beautiful girl."

But Rajasekeram had gone ahead with his plans for marrying Bhahirathi.

\* \* \* \* \*

Once when the daughter in law was visiting with the grandchildren, Achchi insisted that they should go and visit Rajasekeram's family. "Aiyo, you must go. He will like to see the children." In spite of protests : "How can we go at this time of the morning ?" she had insisted.

The house was just next door.

Rajasekeram was seated at the head of the table like a lord. He sat alone, being served by his wife. To and from she kept coming and going from kitchen to dining room, bringing his food and drink. He never turned and looked at the visitors. His wife dared not come and greet them.

Only his daughter by Bhahirathi, Shanthini, came out, sat and

talked with them, offering them a cold drink.

They admired her paintings, landscapes which reflected a European consciousness of autumn scenes – streams, trees, mountains – but there was nothing of her own individuality in those paintings.

Shanthini was invited to go with Kumar's family to the zoo. That was the culmination of the visit.

\* \* \* \* \*

" Why did you insist that we go ? Kumar asked Achchi. " They never even spoke to us. "

That was the only visit to relations.

Rajasekeram died.

Shanthini remarried.

The house was sold for lakhs of rupees.

Bhahirathi was shrewd and wise. She would live with her only daughter till she died.

Achchi's six children were not such a successful investment.

\* \* \* \* \*

" So we were taken one day to school in the village, " said Kumar.

\* \* \* \* \*

There was going to be a big ceremony to learn the secret of Hindu ritualism. We would have to eat only vegetarian food and learn all the mantras. Crowds of students had gathered there. All

of them were in pure white veshtis. A big yaham was lit in the center of the room crackling with fragrant sandalwood sticks. Ghee was poured into the fire. There was an old Brahmin priest and a young priest. Smoke was billowing out. It was hot. We sang thevarams, bhakti songs. Tears poured from our eyes. It was to be a mass initiation ceremony. Water cleansed the hands, thetpai grass bound each others fingers. It went on for hours and hours. Poojas were offered. The mantra was whispered in each ear : " On Namachivaya nama."

We came home.

Every Friday was a day of fasting. One fasted on four Saturdays for Sani. Evenings we would go to the temple. Gingelly seeds were wrapped up and knotted in white cloth. We saturated it with oil. We worshipped at the Navagraha. We walked round three times to appease Saturn.

Navaly. We would wake early in the mornings.

The house is washed and cleaned. We eat from plantain leaves, ghee, curd, rice.

After her bath Achchi knots up her hair and sits on the tinnai. Beside her is a silver bowl of water, holy ash, sandalwood paste and kum-kumum.

We stretched out our hands, palms upturned, resting them on our thighs. We repeated mantra words, counting the notches on our fingers. We repeated one hundred and eight lines. Achchi knew hundreds of mantras.

Finally, holy ash was mixed with water. With this we touched our shoulders, elbows, wrists. Two fingers stretched out in ritualistic gesture, we prayed. Chest and knees were covered with white lines. Then we made a pooja and prayed to the Sun god. When it was all over our bodies were bright with white lines. It was a

matter of pride to show our stripes. We sang thevarams ...

The Brahmin priest leaves the child on the steps of the Kerney in Madurai Meenakshi Amman Kovil. He goes to perform his ablutions. When he returns the child is happy. The father looks at the child's mouth. There are droplets of milk on it. The Brahmin priest is upset. He thinks his caste has been upset. No one other than a Brahmin should touch or feed a Brahmin child. But the child points to the sky. The child describes how from the sky descended a cow on which were seated Siva and his consort Parvathi. " She had earrings. She fed me. She went back to heaven."

\* \* \* \* \*

Achchi reads the Sivapuram. She tells stories. We have Bhajanai.

Murugan calls in the night.

Yogaswamy visits our home. He is our guru.

Rituals. Purifactory rites.

Kumar sings of Siva : " His body is covered with ash from the funeral pyres. Life and death are as one to him."

Kumar knows he will be summoned to light his mother's fire.

Youngest son. The one whom she addresses as ni, never as ningal. He is too poor for her to respect. He has married an outsider.

\* \* \* \* \*

For Achchi her death will also mean her being reborn. She will pass from life to life so that this earth becomes a more familiar place. According to her merit, the rewards or punishments will be

meted out to her.

Under the mango tree she lies reading the Sivapuranam. She hears the chuckle of Murugan in the grove. She has prayed to all the deities. She is favored by Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth. She vowed her constancy to Arundathi. She bought and sold her inauspicious offspring in temples.

\* \* \* \* \*

When the mobs came in the month of July, the shrine room was desecrated.

\* \* \* \* \*

I had been asked to remove my slippers before I entered the room of the gods in the days of their prosperity.

\* \* \* \* \*

The picture of Lakshmi that had adorned their threshold was torn up and flung somewhere, forgotten.

\* \* \* \* \*

The black crows with their greedy beaks come nearer and nearer as Achchi scatters rice in propitiation.

Her seed has no land left to be sown upon. Thorns obliterate the careful boundaries that tradition has apportioned out.

She changes her gods easily.

Sometimes she looks at me. She says : "You are a god to me."



Who can spit then into that almsbowl when there is no one left to fill it with milk and fruit and gold sovereigns ?

\* \* \* \* \*

### THE GREEN WASP

" A green wasp flew into my room. A big one. Last night it was on my pillow."

Her eyes visioned from within see a world different from ours where wasps build tombs to seal her to her death and insects sting to draw her blood, empty her veins that irrigate her body's arid plains to nurture seed of bitter grain, from rivers lifted by the sun to leave the silenced stone that grows between the fissures of the cracked and caking earth.

In all things we find safe, danger she feels. Nature's a threat that sets a noose of crawling stinging things about her neck. Food she softens like mulched earth crushing grains of rice like stones between gnarled fingers, picks out with delicate tips each stalk and leaf, edges the rim of her life's plate with neat trimmed hedge that keeps out slug and weed.

" It will tie my throat," she says. " For old people, food is sometimes crushed in nambiliya. All you want me to eat ? Stalks too ? Too much food. Never mind. Leave it. Leave it. I will eat all. Keep. Keep."

It is our guilt that we should fill that plate.

" I eat only vegetables and rice. A bread piece. A cup of water. Do I ask for all sorts of things ? "

She clasps the bars, locks her mind within, with contumely feeds a starving heart. She closes windows early, shuts out

time both light and dark, to seal off crevices, keep out the green wasp big that hovers at her milkless breasts tugged into emptiness by age's phantom infants, her blood still fed upon by shadows of those daughters and those sons. She fears that green wasp that hovers circling her dodging head to buzz and zoom, lifting her, grub like, immolated into earth filled chambers where new hatched larvae feed upon her stung insentient flesh. Walking in late evening gardens she does not see the green leaves leaping out of earth but sweeps the fallen dry ones, fans coolness on her cheeks as if the drought has settled vulture like upon its planes to pick her drying lips and thirsty tongue and cast her bones upon which the burning sun now feeds, and lies on cold floors to feel the chill to kill heat with that flame that smolders still, make her flesh one with stone.

"Hot, very hot," she says. "It is like an oven. Hot."

She bakes flesh like thin flat loaves of bread to feed her planet's ravening crows. Birds sing for us but screech within the cages of her ears. She bends, lifts stones that lie before her path to clear her way, yet stumbles, feeling blindly tree and branch to hold her straight, staggers, shuffles through time with empty bowl for alms of compassion yet never turns back from visits to those holy temples where once she made her vows to fill her barren womb with fertile seed. The harvest richly garnered from its fields now leaves a dusty threshing floor with chaff and parching husk and time sifts slowly, in wind sieves winnowing dust. Lurching, she still makes her way to god deserted altars on her fruitless pilgrimages gathering the crackling twigs to build her pyre and fill with dust the body's urn sifted from fire to bear in ritual death to

drought starved river death ashes from time's immolation.

\* \* \* \* \*

Vadamarachchy Operation.

" Have you come for the pungavanam ceremony ? "

It is the last of the temple festivals when the god goes to rest in the flower garden. He rests on a swing which sways so gently, ever so gently. He is tired. Oh, he is so tired, this god, with all this journeying, with cries and prayers, the blowing conches, the blaring nadhesweran, the thud, thud, thud of thavil.

Tired, the god rests. But for how long ?

" The troops are being massed at Elephant Pass. Thousands of them."

Have you come for the pungavanam ceremony ?

Too late. The god is a refugee among you. He too will flee with you. The houses are burning. The walls crack. The head of Nandi is sliced off. The kovils are bombed. There is no flower garden for the god to rest in. It is full of stench and sweat. This new nectar flows out of fruit and flower. The thirtham of blood.

" The 15th of May. Fierce fighting started at Lyankachchi. It went on for three days. Lorries and all other vehicles from Colombo halted at Elephant Pass and were not allowed to proceed to Jaffna. Likewise, all vehicles from the Jaffna Peninsula were prevented from proceeding to Colombo. All traffic was at a standstill."

On the fifth day, the army, finding it difficult to proceed, began to retreat to the camp at Elephant Pass.

The next day the forces were air lifted by helicopters and dropped at Mulli, Vallai, and other strategic points on the borders

of Vadamarachchy. Several temporary mini camps were instantly formed. Severe fighting took place on the 20th of May at Mulli. The militants at Vadamarachchy were estimated to be nearly 500 strong. The army started increasing its strength by air lifting.

Heavy battles started at Velvettiturai, Thondamannaru, and Point Pedro.

" May 26th. Seven bombers started bombing the Vadamarachchy area very heavily. Sri Lankan helicopters were guiding and spotting the places to be attacked. Simultaneously there was heavy cannon fire from the warships at sea. The air attacks were so fierce that the militants started to fear that they couldn't stand the strain anymore. The sentry guard at Udupiddy was broken by the army on the 26th and the soldiers started to flow into the villages.

All night and day the seven bombers and sea planes continuously bombarded Vadamarachchy. Civilians who were seeking shelter were fired on at random by helicopters. From the northern and eastern parts of the sea the naval forces were cannonading the coastline. Shells were intermittently fired day and night from the Point Pedro, Velvettiturai and Thondamannaru camps."

A twelve hour curfew was imposed in the province unofficially by the dropping of pamphlets. Those who were unaware of this were injured by helicopters firing on them on the roads.

" May 27th. Troops moved in with helicopter escort. There was a direct confrontation of the army with the militants. Buildings were damaged. Civilians were killed in the cross fire. There was heavy resistance at Udupiddy by the militants. The pressure exerted by the troops forced the militants to give way. Everybody, young and old, moved hither and thither ; even mothers with newly

born infants in arms had to rush to the nearest temples. In spite of the announcements some people remained in their houses for fear of the destruction of property and theft of their possessions.

The first liberation tank forces performed their operation by cutting fences, pushing down parapet walls. The captured men from the ages of fifteen to forty five were forced to do this. The houses were closed. People took refuge in the temples. When they returned they found their possessions were lost. Everything of value was gone.

Males between the ages of fifteen to forty five were lined up, sorted out, and tied hand to hand by rope. They were made to march and run, beaten by the butts of guns. In the burning hot sun men were made to walk bare bodied and bare foot. On the first of June they were not given anything to eat at mid-day or at evening, but they were made to drink dirty water from the channel. School boys were taken to Boosa Camp in the South.

The continuing military action has resulted in nearly 200,000 leaving their houses in the Jaffna Peninsula. 10,000 are refugees. Nearly 4,000 have left for India. From Vadamarachy about 20,000 people have found places to live in Thenmarachy and other comparatively safe places.

There is no one to count the number of the dead and injured.

After the completion of the Liberation Operation the Good Will operation was formulated. But parents refused to send their children to school for fear of arrests by the army. One mother said : "Unless you withdraw the army we are not going to send our children to school."

In the meantime the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam attacked Nelliady camp housed in a Maha Vidyalayam and caused heavy damage. The army suffered heavy casualties.

The Indian air force dropped food and other essential items. We took shelter in bunkers as soon as we heard the bombers. My mother had collected a little rice and dhal. We ate this." Letter from the North.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kandaswamy Kovil 1982 :

At Kandaswamy Kovil, Shakthi calls me : " Come this way. Follow me." We reach the temple veedhi. Thousands of devotees are gathered here under a clear and cloudless sky. It is not yet hot. But soon the air, impregnated with clouds of smoke from burning camphor, will ripple with waves of heat.

We have bathed early in the morning, pouring cool water on our bodies from the brass chembus. We have observed viridam with the rest of the household and set out to reach the Kandaswamy Kovil at Nallur. The veedhi is crowded. Many of the people have spent the whole night under the stars so that they can be present for the early morning poojas within the temple. Others wait outside the great white walls or crowd at the tall doorway for the god to emerge.

The womenfolk are in brilliant silk sarees patterned with gold lace. Garlands of orange and white flowers adorn their hair. Light catches the brilliants flashing in their nostrils.

The widows are in sober white garments.

The men are barebodied in white veshti and shawls of fine white cotton or silk bordered with threads of gold. Some of the devotees wear deep saffron colored cloths printed with crimson characters.

We are all bare-footed, treading the sacred path that the god

will take in his passage along the veedhi. The faces around me are wrapt with that inward look that sees only the god. Their lips shape his name. Their voices rise, a beginning wind that stirs the shimmering air. Their eyes envision only the image of the god. Their faces, their bodies, their hands which they lift high above their heads, reflect only the expression of bakthi. A complete purgation.

The poojas have begun. They are going on within the temple. The ringing of bells. The blowing of conches, shells of wind, making echoes and reverberations. The nadesweran strains plunging out of trumpet throats. The clash of cymbals. The chanting of Sanskrit slokas.

We are outside the temple. Kandaswamy Kovil with its white-washed walls and immense pillars stands on a flat horizonless plane.

The evening before I had stood within the great hall with its glittering glass shaded lamps and chandeliers.

The poojas went on and on. I could see nothing through the thick, dense crowds. Walled in by throngs of bodies, but hardly feeling their touch, the flesh withdraws into its private worship. The space of aloneness is clear about you. Human breath becomes the breath of incense.

Rituals of others, not mine. The clamor of prayers, thevarams, bells and cymbals. The vibrations of bakthi and the cries of Haro ! Hara ! Haro ! Hara ! eddy about the golden bodies of the gods. The faces of the gods scarcely seen because of the heavy garlands of flowers and the jewelled padakkams and chains adorning them.

Close, close to the god stood throngs of people, strong young men waiting with their arms outstretched to touch the vahanam of

the god and bear it on their shoulders.

The conches blow and the nadheswearing bursts out into ragas. The beating of thavil, the clashing of cymbals herald the journey of the god and his consorts.

Arumugaswamy and Valli and Deivayani were borne out onto the veedhi on their journey into the outer worlds followed by crowds of devotees. Then they are brought back again.

Bakthi. Bakthi. Praying. Singing thevarams. Dancing and worshipping. Bakthi.

Arumugaswamy returns. He is taken within his sanctum. With a dramatic flourish the painted curtain is drawn. Silence fills the hall. Many still remain prostrate as if they never want to rise from their prayers again. Others stand unmoving, their hands outstretched, praying and praying as if their invocations and pleadings to the god will never cease. In the center of the hall the Bhajanai singers chant thevarams and dance while the cymbals keep the rhythm.

"Come this way. We will go ahead and wait the arrival of Swamy. Swamy will come this way." Shakthi says this as she urges and impels us forward. We follow her swiftly but we cannot walk fast as the sand underfoot is very soft. We cannot place a firm foothold on it.

Around the veedhi there are many young men as well as the middle aged and the old, rolling and rolling round the temple on the beedhi.

Penance. The repayment of vows. They abase themselves in the dust. The white veshtis are stained with sweat and red dust as they endlessly roll like white billows on the sandy shores of Samsara.

Their bodies turn over and over against the sand that sticks



glittering on their shoulder blades. They lie for a moment flat on their stomachs, holding in their hands a coconut or a lime. They pray aloud. Endless dialogue with a god whose voice only they can hear. Or perhaps the god is silent and does not answer. Round and round the entire length of the veechi they impel their bodies.

The sun is hot. The sand burns. This is the sea of Samsara. They cry and pray with eyes that see nothing of the seething crowds around them. Rivulets of sweat stream down their bodies. Purgation.

Bodies spin round and round. They stop for a moment. They start again. They never relinquish their hold on the lime or coconut.

Sometimes there is a mother or friend or relative who walks quietly beside. Patience of the onlooker. Patient of the share of suffering and penance. They bend down and arrange the folds of a veshti that had fallen in array. Others wipe the sweat off a body with a towel. Step by step they follow the passage of the penitent.

One thin young man whose body jerks violently as he cries out to god, clasps his coconut with taut yet trembling fingers ; his whole body is impelled in a frenzy of movement as he cries and sobs importuning the god. His voice rises, he screams out in an agony of prayer.

People stop for a moment and stare with pity at this young man. Then they too continue their journey to reach the Thermutti where Swami will arrive.

So close to the dust. Completely without defenses. Suffering is shed like drops of sweat that flow in a stream from their bodies, stain the dust with moisture, and are sucked up by the glistening white sun. Another body and then another takes the vacant place. The disordered sand flits and falls, swirls and shakes, and within

the impress of his suffering the human pulse quivers and lies still.

Each man waits patiently while the other stops and prays. He does not impede or hurt his neighbor as he struggles along on this difficult passage. He shares a territory which he knows he cannot cling to. Even the penitent is transient on this pilgrimage. He goes his way leaving others to complete their penance. Some force stronger than his own puny strength urges him on tirelessly.

No one gives in. No one rises with exhaustion or retires. As I move behind Shakthi, trying to keep pace with her as she slips between the crowds, I stumble and almost fall. My feet cannot take me any further. I stop, bodies pressing against me. I look down at my feet. A man lies prostrate on the earth wrapt in silent prayer. As my foot strikes his body, I cry out : " I am sorry. Forgive me." He doesn't even look up at me. He is aware of no one. Not a word of anger or reproof comes from him. He remains where he is while waves of humanity surge forward. No one tramples on him although thousands surround him thronging the veedhi.

The textures of brilliantly colored silk sarees touch me. I feel the warmth of breath, the coolness of skin. Gold glitters in their ears and nostrils, and on their throats and wrists. Anklets clink. Pottus blaze out from the stripes of holy ash on their foreheads. Bright streaks of vermillion kum-kumum mark the partings on the hair of the married women.

They come from all walks of life. From those distant villages with their groves of palmyrah palms and woven fences that enclose the privacy of their lives.

The cooking pots are turned over, drying in the sun. In Chunn a-kam fish market the huge turtles lie still, the mass of quivering flesh hidden beneath the grey black shells.

Temple festivals, and the long horned white oxen draw the carts along the straight roads that lead to Nallur, to Sellachanathi. The armored tanks and trucks have not yet begun to take the same route. The Bhajanai singers dance along the roads which are as yet unmined. Fasting. Viridam. Fasting. You go to meet god purged, with your belly and innards empty.

Absorbed in Bakthi. No one who is caught in this mood sees anybody but the god. Hands lift like waving grasses in the wind. Voices pour like oil into the kuthuvillaku to soak the wicks that soar up in the tongues of flame. Clouds of smoke, fragrant smoke, rise from burning censers of camphors,

It grows hotter. The sun is coming up. The sand begins to burn underfoot. The sun is a glittering silver scorpion. Stings with a tail of light. Fragrant camphor. Women walk through the crowds with pots of burning fire on their heads. The fragrance of camphor drifts from the flames. Chains of flowers flutter from long braided plaits. Hands bear with great reverence the pooja offerings – coconuts, limes, fruits, flowers, camphor, tetpai grass, tulsi leaves. The doorways of the houses along the vedhi are decorated on both sides with plantain trees, whole uprooted trunks of plantain trees which bear heavy bunches of fruit.

Before the doorways tables are set with pooja offerings to the god who passes that way. White cloths cover the tables. Shining silver kumbums bound with an intricate macrame of thread. Coconuts. The pusaris crack them and bear them away streaming and dripping with the sweet water as the vahanam passes. A ritual array of flowers and camphor, fruit and thirtham, sandalwood holy ash and kum-kumum, are set out in silver utensils. Bright yellow alari poor, scarlet shoe flowers. Ripe combs of plantain. The householders are dressed in rich clothes and adorned with

jewels as they wait for Swamy to come.

There is a profound feeling of joy. The joy is expressed in the devotion, in the feelings of bakthi. The penitents grovelling in the dust with their sweat stained veshtis. Their abasement is also their devotion and bakthi.

We reach the Ther Muttu. Two ancient vilvam trees grow beside it. People touch them and pray. They light camphor beneath the branches.

Shakthi still leads us through the crowds. We follow with single intent. "Come," she says. "We will see if we can go right up to where the vahanam will be brought."

The vahanam appears, shimmering in the sun, rising above the sea of heads, borne along the burning sands. The ornate parasol trembles above Arumugaswamy and the two consorts Valli and Deivanayi.

The devotees raise their hands above their heads. Their cries of Haro, Hara, Haro, Hara, shiver through the air. They surge round the Sinhasana so that they can touch the vahanam. They fall upon the earth and pray.

The god travels among the penitents. The pusaris run up to the pooja tables. They crack the coconuts and take up the halves filled with fruit, flowers, lime and tulsi leaves. They bear them to the vahanam.

We mount the stairway and look out on the veedhi. Arumugaswamy glitters in the sunlight. At his sides are Valli and Deivayani in their rich silk clothes.

The whole night has been spent in dressing the gods. Garlands of flowers are strung closely on white threads. Fingers that so delicately pick unbruised each white flower weave them into chains that hang heavy and fragrant about their necks. They are adorned

with attiyale padakkams of rubies, brilliants and pearls. Their clothes are of rich red silk, bordered with gold.

In front of the vahanam the nadesweran players lift their instruments to their lips, sway their heads from side to side, playing the ragas.

The thavil players beat on the drums and the bhajanai singers follow clapping. Praising the god, dancing with joy and bakthi as they come to Arumugaswamy.

A white haired old man steps out. He is instantly surrounded by others who sing and clap. He whirls round in a complete abandon of joy. His eyes see nothing and no one except the vision of the god. His old body is lissome and youthful as he expresses his bakthi. The others clap and sing in rhythm to his steps.

A woman drifts along in trance like movements, lost to the crowd. She sways and moves. She twirls her body like a windblown leaf, dancing and dancing, propelled by some supernatural force that imposes its own rhythms. Her body slants like an edge of light as she silently passes through the crowds and vanishes.

The vahanam reaches the Ther Muttill. The gates burst open. The crowds surge up the steps as the god is borne up in his Sinhasana with its silver damascene work. The Brahmin priests wait in readiness to perform the pooja.

The halved coconuts stand in readiness with their ritual offerings. Rings of thetpai grass are wound round the fingers of the devotees. Everybody wants to hold, touch, grasp, be close to the god, to bathe themselves in the golden flood of bakthi.

I stand pressing against a pillar.

I almost suffocate. Bodies, bodies press against me. Sweat streams in rivulets between my shoulder blades. I cannot breathe. I think I will die. I will never come out of this press of bodies.

The Sinhasana rests for a moment with Swamy and his two consorts. The faces of the gods have finely sculpted features. Garlands thick and heavy round their necks. Glittering jewels.

Below the Ther Mutti crowds surge and throng the veedhi. The Iyer tries to make way but no one moves. Sometimes they step aside briefly, smile, but do not utter a word. The priests wave their arms about. They shout : " Give room. Give room. " The devotees stand where they are. They press close to the Mutti.

Designs are carved on the Sinhasana. Flowers and leaves wreath the round in clusters and flowing vines. Rings, chains and earrings of gold adorn Arumugaswamy and his consorts.

The Ther stands close to the Mutti. It is carved out of rich heavy dark wood. Appliqued hangings of white cotton are suspended from the canopy. Brilliant designs of flowers and birds and leaves are illuminated by the sunlight.

Before Swamy enters the Ther once again, a pooja is performed with the breaking of coconuts and the offering of flowers and fruit, limes and tulsi leaves. Conches are blown. Bells ring. The nadheswaran bursts forth. A shudder passes through the crowds packed shoulder to shoulder as they raise their voices and cry out Haro, Hara, Haro, Hara.

The Ther, heavy and difficult to maneuver, begins to move slowly. The heavy wooden wheels creak. The canopy floats like a shimmering bubble above the heads of the crowds. A sea of black heads keeps bobbing up and down on the flat open plain. A wave of golden bodies moves, and a spume of white veshtis flows through the brilliant peacock blue and green silk sarees. The Ther begins its slow and stately yet laborious passage as it is guided through the throngs. The Iyer scatters petals of bright flowers on the crowds.

Clack. Clack. The sharp sound of breaking coconuts. A group of young men gathered together breaks hundreds of coconuts against each other, bathing themselves with the sweet cool water. It streams down their heads and bodies ; their thin white cotton veshtis cling to their limbs. They leap. They shout. They sing Haro, Hara, Haro, Hara. The bhajanai singers clash their cymbals. They clap and sing thevaram. The sunlight is now brilliant. Through the praying crowds, the women take three steps, prostrate themselves, and pray.

The god is carried into the temple. The crowds follow along the veedhi into the cool darkness of the pillared interior.

We return. The soldiers wait in their trucks with their guns loaded. This is the passage back into the outside world. The Ther does not take this route.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sunday, September 27, 1987

Thileepan, deputy leader of the L.T.T.E. Political Wing, died yesterday at the Nallur Kandaswamy temple in Jaffna at 10 : 58 A. M. after nearly twelve days of fasting. Thileepan (23) began his fast to the death on September 15th, when the L.T.T.E. decided to launch a non-violent campaign in support of five demands submitted to the government.

\* \* \* \* \*

Thangeswary died on a day in the month of November in the village of Navaly. She was buried on the same day. She died under tragic circumstances. There was no time for the rituals of death or

even for cremation.

\* \* \* \* \*

When my father in law Pata died, he who also came from Navaly, there were crowds of friends and relations in the Colombo house.

He lay in his coffin lined with rich white satin. He wore his silk suit and gold bordered shawl with garlands of flowers round his neck.

His grandchildren walked round the coffin with burning incense sticks in their hands while they dropped coins on his body.

The pestle falling with a dull thud into the mortar sounded like heavy ominous footfalls in an empty room.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Thangeswary died there was no time for funeral rites. There were no oppari singers to mourn and wail for her as they sang her praises.

\* \* \* \* \*

"So many of our relatives have died," said Shakthi, who was related to Thangeswary. "They have lost their homes and now live with us. Thank god, our home was saved."

\* \* \* \* \*

Only Thangeswary remembered that my mother in law had



been called Babo Aththe and that whenever she came to Navaly from Colombo she would come and see the little girl and bring her an apple.

Achchi's gifts to her granddaughters were the traditional gold bangles. Her jewel boxes had once been full. The inventory in her father's will had lists of those jewels and their value in rupees, dollars and pounds. There were padakkams set with rubies and blue sapphires, gold rings, cat's eyes, topazes, diamonds, gold attiyal, ear ornaments called Cappoo set with rubies and emeralds. There were double string necklaces called Wairamany Cooroowe, Padam Pentchu, Canda Saram, Candesan, Padde Modaram, Pahato Malee, necklaces of pearls and gold Kasturiy beads.

Everything had been apportioned out and given to her daughters from her share.

Yet these possessions which signified the caste and social status of the family left her life impoverished.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was Thangeswary, a stranger to me, who had bound the circle of thetpai grass round my finger, joined with hers, and led me to my husband's house in Navaly, and to her own home where she had spoken words of kindness and hospitality.

It was Shakthi who had drawn the kolam at the threshold of her home and fed me with sadham and fruits.

I had never eaten the Pongal rice with my husband's family.

I, the outsider, had never been invited to partake of the remembrance food at their almsgivings.

\* \* \* \* \*

Thangeswary was the daughter of Ramachandran, who had led the bhajanai singers every Friday at Chinthamani Pillaiyar kovil. After his death, Thangeswary had taken his place. She had led the bakthi singers as they danced and sang thevarams along those roads as the armies passed through with their trucks and armored cars.

The Security Forces had been displaced by the Peace Keeping Forces of the Indian armies. The guerillas escaped time and time again. The civilians took the full brunt of it.

Thangeswary was one of the many.

Shells struck houses. People were killed in crossfires. They took refuge in temples, schools, churches.

There were fifty thousand refugees in Nallur Kandaswamy kovil. There was no food. There was no water. The people were sick.

A man was shot when he came to the door holding his child in his arms. He got onto his bicycle to search for help. He was stopped by the I.P.K.F. soldiers and not allowed to proceed. He sat down where he was. He bled to death.

\* \* \* \* \*

There are different kinds of death. Yet even life must come out death.

\* \* \* \* \*

A Christian priest talks to a young woman. His father has been called for questioning to the Army camp. The old wife had sent the maid with him. She was an unmarried woman who had

lived with them for many years. When the father had finished talking, answering questions, the priest looked around for the young woman to accompany him back home. She had disappeared. He went home alone.

After some days, the maid returned to the home of some relatives of hers.

" I want to die, " she tells the priest.

" Think that you might become a mother one day. Think of life growing within you, " the priest says.

" The girls are hiding in the attics, " Sharmini says. " The Security forces were much better. They treated us with respect. "

\* \* \* \* \*

Yet the I.P.K.F. soldiers suffer too. They had been welcomed on their arrival. Now they get blown up by landmines. They fry to death with rubber tires placed round their necks.

\* \* \* \* \*

A young girl is arrested and taken into the camp. There is a hooded informer in the Captain's room. He nods if you have affiliations with the Tigers.

" Only tell us where the Tigers are, where their arms are, and you can go. "

\* \* \* \* \*

The woman who is lying in the hospital with a bullet wound, who is she ?

The girl's mother said : " The I.P.K.F. soldiers came to the house. They took her by the hand and called her to go with them. They tried to rape her. She broke loose and ran away from them. They shot at her. The bullet lodged in her spine. "

\* \* \* \* \*

" They took the brother in law to the army camp. They beat him with bicycle chains. "

\* \* \* \* \*

Thangeswary had taken me through these villages where these events occurred. Back to Navalay. We had gone on the spur of the moment. She had followed my desire to return to a house where there was no one left to call me an outsider.

What had been relinquished had been taken over by others. No one repaired the fences or put up new ones. Fences, walls, barriers, could keep no one out anymore, however alien.

The Nalavars used to come and renew the fences. They would climb the palmyrah trees and cut the huge fronds and fling them down. The leaves would fall in a quick parabolic movement, suspended, static for an instant, and then unfurl, spreading out on the earth of the grove. A whole trail of these dark green leaves would then be laid out, creating a pathway through the straight lines of palmyrah trees.

The Nalavars make a big eyed needle out of the coconut wood and sit down to sew the leaves for the fences. It is pricked through the leaves. Choir rope is used to treadle it. This is repeated until it is firmly fixed in place. Then the rope is cut and the knot is tied.

The fence posts have a wall of these leaves. The old brittle leaves are taken down and used as mulch for the paddy fields.

Those harvests had been abundant ones. My husband Kumar and his brothers had played in the straw all night.

The Nalavar women used to come and dig out the stores of grain packed into thick yellow seams by the field mice. They came to the fields with the children carrying their winnowing kullas and collected the fresh harvest paddy.

While the Vellala family took carts loaded with bags of paddy to fill their pettagams, the Nallavars, who had no fields of their own, had to set the field mice scattering while they rifled their stores.

Those fields were sold for the sake of Kumar's younger sister. The Navalay house was abandoned.

Now there was no need of fences.

The whole land, which had been apportioned out in unequal lots, was a lost wilderness.

\* \* \* \* \*

That was the village that Thangeswary had taken me to before her death. On the way, as we travelled by bus, she had pointed out the great temple at Annacoddai of which my brother in law was the patron.

He too was an outsider, uprooted long long ago from his homeland.

Thangeswary led me along the veedhi of Chinthamani Pillaiyarkovil.

The house was a diminished dwelling. The room with the carved doors was locked. A Brahmin priest had the key.

Strangers were living in the house.

If the uprooted ones were to come back to claim their privileges they would find that they no longer belonged themselves.

There was no clear path through the wilderness.

Achchi had lost almost everything : the houses and properties in Sea Street, Chekku Street, Lunupokuna, Coffee Street, Bankshall Street, Sedawatte, Peliyagoda. Sold off piece by piece by her guardian.

Displaced.

Now she lived like a refugee in a house, a house that was not her house, given as dowry to her younger daughter.

And the elder son, selling land, from the house that was not his house, demanding that his sister pay him a million rupees to leave the house, blackmailing her, ruthlessly taking over everything as he had always felt was his prerogative.

His sister now felt ashamed before her in laws.

Displaced.

Achchi too had to flee once from the mobs, bundled into a friend's car and driven off to her elder daughter's house where she lived for a period, unwanted, unloved, an outsider, bitterly resentful of her diminished status, demanding that life should register no change.

There was no one to call her Babo Aththe. Those who remembered her were dead, but she still remained blind to the lies and cheats that were preacticed by her own offspring.

An outsider.

A refugee.

Forever displaced from the power she had enjoyed.

The vedhi of Nallur Kandaswamy kovil was empty and silent.

A great stench remained as if Death must make its presence felt for a longer time, until the gods were once more given their ritual baths and the rites of purification were carried out.

The gods waited for the conches to blow. A different vision would greet their eyes as processions of skeletons walked, where the refugees had walked, along those burning plains.

The gods were patient. The shells had not opened wounds in their bronze flesh. The hovering crows had fluttered away, replete from their many repasts.

We had left Thangeswary behind. The apples she had eaten had never left any seed which took root. The soil too was alien.

" Amman, Amman, Mary, Mary, " a mad swamy kept on repeating on the bus returning us from Navaly.

Stranger that he was, he offered us what no one else could offer, sharing with us, the kinship of the gods.

\* \* \* \* \*

## REFUGEES AT NALLUR KANDASWAMY KOVIL

The whine of the nadhesweran in the mourning ragas

Endlessly sounds over the white plain.

The conch splits the silence, the eardrum

Aches with echoes that cannot make

Those penitents who roll over and over again

In the sand, ever to rise again.

Somehow death resembles the trance

Out of which the bakthi singers never

Seem to wake, the death rattle claps

Within their throat to keep the talam.

There is too much remembrance here.  
The kumbums that were overful with fresh  
Husked coconuts heaped round with fruit  
And grain, are empty, shot bellies spilling over  
With vermilioned entrails of paddy stalks,  
The fruit all spoiled, golden skins blackened  
With rottenness.

Embers crumble from unreplenished  
Firepots reeling off the heads of penitents.

Surely those who are now camped here  
Must remember how once they bathed the gods  
With milk and sandalwood, inhaling the juices  
From ripe fruit that dripped into their nostrils  
Laved their lips, the golden juices from ripe mangoes  
Ripped open now by memory's crowbeaks  
To show the sucked starved stone of their bellies

The empty hands that held nectar  
Like the cut halves of fruit  
Scraped clean by the teeth of famine

Crow feathers grow black and sleek  
The beaks all dripping as they fly off  
Plumping their plumes after the feast  
This was the world of gods alone and penitents where those  
who seek refuge are now camped.



All day their prayers and pleas  
Rumble guttural in their throats or murmur  
As they receive the meagre hospitality of the gods  
Crowded out in courtyards, crouching in death  
Shadows, the cringing sun inching slowly through,  
Sucking the drying marrow of their bones.

The lights flicker out in the inner sanctum  
The wicks lie blackened in the empty brass bowls  
Charring fingers that scratch at the residual oil  
Starving for fire to light the flame  
Of half burnt pyres

Remember those journeys that the gods  
Once took ; " Swamy is coming, Swamy is coming, "  
You said, as you grasped my hand, leading me  
To the throne where the bronze body of Arumugaswamy  
Burst into orchards of glittering fruit jewels,  
Clustering vineyards of plenty, the penitents  
Reeling under the drench of wine from split  
Coconuts, the lotus petals falling onto the sand  
From the moving Ther where now the feces  
Pile up to make those delicate bronze nostrils  
Wrinkle and chiselled lips part  
In a grimace puckered with distaste

Tear off those silken robes, that unwashed smell,  
Those staling garlands, rip them off  
They retch, sickened with the smells of foetid air  
As Death spills out its thin black stream

From hunger loosened bowels

Place white flags in their hands

That stiffen in a rigor

Tell them to step down from their damascened

Thrones to mop up blood

Dress the wounds of penitents

Build gigantic pyres of those

Carved chariots.

(Received March 16, 1989)